

## **MUSLIM - CHRISTIAN RELATIONS: THE NIGERIAN ARMED FORCES EXPERIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

This paper intends to show the practical experiences of the relations between the Muslims and Christians in a military circle. The Nigerian military recognizes only two religion for its members (Islam and Christianity) and the accepted places of worship in all the military Barracks are the Mosques for Muslims and Catholic and Protestant churches for Christians personnel. As Muslims and Christians are the majority in the military that makes their interacting imperative. The study therefore, seeks to fill the gap observed in the interactions of Muslims and Christians in a civilian setting. The researcher used qualitative method of generating data for the article. The major findings of the paper are discipline and tolerance contributed to which relations between Muslims and Christians in the military. The unity among the military is what is keeping the nation united, and therefore, it is recommended that further research be done to identify how to curb that menace of religious intolerance totally.

**Keywords:** Muslim, Christian, Nigeria, Armed forces, Experience.

### **Introduction**

Inter-religious relations may be a challenge to one's faith, but one cannot run away from such a challenge. Through the challenges we may find that our faith can grow. Religion is one of the important and enduring human phenomena. There is no human society that does not practice religion in one form or another. It has survived and adapted to every facet of human life, culture and civilization throughout history. Religion plays fundamental roles in bestowing meaning and significance to human existence. It also plays variety of roles in human life that range from psychological, social, economic, and political etc. Religion provides a powerful mechanism for anxiety relief and also provides sense of security and

certainty. It also allows people to better cope with personal tragedy and hardships that we all go through in life. (Murtala Ibrahim, 134).

The existence of religion can be traced back to human civilization. Some religions have died out but others have grown up to take their place. (Jones, 15) The three major religions that exist in Nigerian are: Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Some religions have a history of radical revivalism. Some of the followers of the three religions do not consider each other as friend but rivals. Although the Muslims acknowledged Christ as a Prophet, they hold strongly to the teachings of the Qur'an envisage living strictly according to the Qur'an and they find it necessary to conquer and bring all non Muslims into true faith, which is Islam. Some Christians on the other hand feel offended by the teachings of Islam and hold strongly to the position that, outside Christ, there is no salvation. There are religions also in Nigeria that feels different from the three major religions in Nigeria.

The Nigerian military was established to defend the country from outside attack and threat; since its establishment, it has become the only force that has kept the country secured from being destroyed by the forces of internal disputes and conflicts between Muslims and Christians. Despite the power and the principles of the military unity that has forced the country to remain a untied entity, it has somehow been challenged by the Muslim – Christian differences which produce minor problems here and there.

The Military is a combination of people that represent all ethnic groups and belongs to different faiths. Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions. The military comprises of the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Navy and the Nigerian Air Force. all these 3 arms use what is call Harmonized Terms and Conditions of Service (HTACOS) both for officers and other ranks (Soldiers, Ratings and Airmen). Although the military recognised officially only two religions: Islam and Christianity, but if an officer opts to be a pagan or any religion other than the two recognised by the military, he or she will not be denied his right of choice. However, the only accepted places of worship to be build in all the Military Barracks are the Mosques for Muslims and Catholic and Protestant churches for Christian personnel.

As Muslims and Christians are the majority in the military more than any other traditional religion, that makes their interactions imperative. The recruitment of soldiers or commissioning of officers in the Nigerian Armed Forces is based on advertisement and the candidates to apply must meet up with the same criteria of educational qualification and physical fitness, religion is immaterial except the Chaplain and Imam Corp which are considered to Man or take charge of the worship places as spiritual guide to both personnel and their families.

Intensive military training in all military training institutions is a function which all recruits or cadets must pass through irrespective of which religion they belong to, and whoever is found unfit is withdrawn immediately from the training. Discipline is the bedrock of the military worldwide, Nigeria inclusive. The military training schools are the first place where the culture of discipline is emphasised and injected to all its personnel without looking at their religious inclinations. Some of these discipline aspects include respect of the superior by the inferior in terms of salutation and quick response to superior's commands. The harmonisations of all military parades on its entire personnel makes the Muslim – Christian relations among the officers so cordial and fantastic.

Previous studies have tended to established how Nigerian Muslims and Christians especially in the North, lived harmoniously with great deal of trust and respect for each other before the unexpected miserable and devastating politico-religious and communal-tribal clashes of late 1970s to date (Thaddeus, 52). The earlier Muslim – Christian tension aroused during Gen. Murtala regime in 1975 and later during the period of Gen. Obasanjo in 1977 when the Islamophobic tendency of Islamizing Nigeria was resounding after the meeting of the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) and Constitutional Assembly (CA) debates on the Constitutional Inclusion of *Shari'a* Legal System. (Lugga 2)

Such earlier studies also show how Northern Nigeria continued to suffer from various religious uprisings mostly with political under pinning. These include the Maitatsine Riots of between 1980 and 1985 with devastating aftermaths. Subsequently, the Kafanchan ferocity of March 1987 erupted between Muslim – Christian students of the College of Education Kafanchan and spread to other settlements in Kaduna State, which lasted for almost fourteen days where lives were lost and properties as well as worship places indiscriminately vandalized. (Kukah 185).

### **Muslim – Christian Relations In Nigeria Before And After Independence**

Muslim – Christian relations have been an issue since the historic rise of Islam more than fourteen centuries ago. Their complex history has in many cases been characterized by constructive living together, but sometimes also marked by rivalry or war. WCC (4). It is observed that the type and level of the relationship between the two religions have been parallel at the level of their theological thinking. Nigeria is described as conglomeration of nation states Adamolekun (68). As a pluralistic society, “It is diverse in culture, language, and ethnic background”. Adamolekun (68) there are many religions in the country thus making

Nigeria a pluralistic and multi-religious state with Nigerians being Muslims, Christians or adherents of Traditional Religion.

Michael Crowther (191) reveals that, Nigeria as a nation came in to existence as a result of the British amalgamation of the North and Southern protectorates in 1914 by Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard. However, it is believed that there was Islam and Christianity in Nigeria before Colonial Administration, and they both competed to win converts into the faiths without serious friction between them.

Nigeria has been described by Archbishop Teissier of Algiers as “the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world” Onaiyekan (48); by this he means that there is no other nation with so many Christians and Muslims living side-by-side like Nigeria. This reality makes Nigeria an important test case for developing patterns of Muslim – Christian relations in Africa. Nigeria provides a rich context for understanding the socio-cultural, economic and political issues that are involved in the Muslim-Christian relations.

However, Jami’u (134) Maintains that, right from the struggle against colonization, Nigeria started experiencing two major problems that to some extent is still stumbling blocks to its political stability. And they are, tribal or ethnic allegiance being politicized and also religion being exploited. Despite the above submission, there was clear indication that Muslim – Christian relation was cordial in Nigeria from the beginning.

Bappa (41) maintains that, like any other community, a very important characteristics feature of African Society, is the sense of togetherness of people living in the same area irrespective of religion or tribe. Nigeria was not different in this regard before the crises. He also pointed to the fact that, socially the interactions between Muslims and Christians is said to have no bound before the religious crises. He revealed that, in Gindiri village, the Christian missionaries used to enter the Muslim houses to preach without molestation, while the Christians used to call the Muslims to slaughter animals for their food. Then during festivals of each religion, they do invite each other to celebrate together. Bappa believed that movements of the adherents were not restricted and Muslims and Christians did sleep in each other’s houses. This made the atmosphere peaceful and conducive for inter-marriages and gradual conversion of Christians.

Dagu, in her research project (12 – 14), buttress the issue of inter-marriage where she believed that, “in every Muslim house, there is converted or unconverted married Christian lady and on the other side a Christian man that Islamized will marry Hausa or Fulani girl born in Islam”. Hence, in Plateau state most Muslims houses have some Christian family. However, the better dimension of the trust in Muslim – Christian relation was not to be permanent in Plateau State, as there emerged the feeling of domination, oppression, injustice

and the feeling of superiority and inferiority complex among the Muslim and the Christians, and indigene and non-indigene relationship.

### **Challenges of Muslim – Christian Relations in Nigeria**

Jake Otonko, opined that there are a lot of challenges associated with Muslim – Christian relations. These challenges have been identified by many scholars in different forms. It is painful that the consequences of these challenges have left Nigeria crawling in her developmental efforts. Often, there is a rebuilding of destroyed structures and the movement in development is stripped and sometimes back-peddalling instead of forward movement. For there to be any headway in development especially in its sustainable form in Nigeria, these challenges must be checkmated. But what are these challenges? Gwamna highlights them as follows:

Religious corruption, manipulation of religion, poverty, illiteracy, government's partisanship with politics, governments; failure to address socio-political and economic problems, collapse of religious and societal values and hypocrisy of followers and religious leaders. (59 – 63) Most scholars discuss the challenges facing Muslim – Christian relations in terms of the causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria. In this vein, Ebioghae identifies the following which share a lot with those mentioned by Gwamna: Ignorance and poverty, intolerance and prejudice, abuse of freedom of expression, political manipulation and patronage (351-358).

### **Responsibilities Of Chaplains And Imams In The Military**

Chaplains and Imams serve as moral, ethical and spiritual advisers to their Commanders in the Nigerian Armed Forces. They ensure the free exercise of religion and oversee all religious activities and programme in all commands, units and establishments. Much of the work they do is one-on-one with officers, men, civilians working with the military and their families. (Ekeyi 28)

They go where the troops go. They are in the barracks, offices, schools, detention quarters, hospitals, training areas, as well as combat zones ministering personnel of all faiths, denominations, and persuasions. They must be able to work in a pluralistic religious environment, respecting and accommodating members of all faiths without compromising their beliefs.

Other specific duties includes:-

- i. Operating in pluralistic environment and abiding by the code of ethic approved by the Ministry of Defence (MOD)
- ii. Exemplifying to all people the best characteristics
- iii. Performing marriage and conducting memorial services and funerals for service members and their families.
- iv. Visiting military hospitals, family members in their homes, in their work places, in detention facilities, in training areas and during combat operations.
- v. Conducting various religious seminars as retreats such as marriage, parenting spiritual leadership training, anger control etc.
- vi. Teaching classes to service members on topics of religious tolerance, ethics, leadership, and other areas that build moral character in men and women.
- vii. Counselling service men and families during times of crisis, and supporting them in challenges they face due to family separation because of military deployments.
- viii. Accompanying the military personnel and providing encouragement, spiritual strength, and religious support during periods of combat. (Ekeyi 28-29)

The three religious bodies (Islam, Protestant and Catholic) are officially established and coordinated at the services headquarters (AHQ, NHQ and HQNAF). The three directorates were in the same office at their various service headquarters. This will enable them work harmoniously and speak with one voice. They jointly sign a memoranda or a proposal of any project or any religious demand to the service as easy as possible. The three religious leaders jointly advises the Service Chiefs on any policy that affect the religions. For instance if a particular programme is designated and will affect any religious program or contradict the religious beliefs, the three leaders jointly draw the attention of their Service Chief on the effect of such polices or programmes.

### **Influence Of Religion In The Military**

The Nigerian Armed Forces' origins lies in the elements of the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF). In 1956 it was renamed the Nigerian Military Forces. Although the founding fathers of the Nigerian Military were majority Christians, but the orientation and training are not base on the Christian ideologies, however, there are some element of Christian activities that is taken into military, such as military weddings and burials.

### **Interference of CAN and JNI in the Military**

According to Commodore Chonoko the interest and the influence of these two religions organization in the appointment of the Service Chiefs in any government of the Day have contributed immensely in the influence of religion in the Nigerian Armed Forces. Chonoko laments that the influence of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the

Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) in the Nigerian Military has positive and negative effects. The positive side of its influence is the pressure of the two religious bodies keep on putting on any Federal Government that their members have rights to exercise their religious beliefs without hindrance or molestations. They also assist directly or indirectly in building the worship centres in the barracks and also train its personnel (Imams and Chaplain).

The negative effect of their interference, Chonoko said, in terms of appointment of the Service Chiefs some brilliant and competent officers will be disqualified based on their religious beliefs, which is a minus to effectiveness and combat readiness to the entire Nigerian Armed Forces in general and that arm of service in particular. This is because religion is used in the appointment of Service Chiefs so also it goes down to the appointments of all the Principal Staff Officers (PSOs). These include the appointments of Branch Chiefs, General Officers Commanding (GOCs), Flag Officers Commanding (FOCs) and Air Officers Commanding (AOCs). In some cases it also affects the appointments of Brigade Commanders and Battalion Commanders.

### **Political Ambitions after Retirement**

Commander AbdulAziz Nyako is of the view that serving officers in the Armed Forces that have political ambitions in a democratic setting do favour personnel of their own religion in one way or the other, such as appointments to lucrative offices, promotions and sometimes even at the commissioning of new officers and recruitment of soldiers. This religious sentiment in the military emanates from the attitude of politicians that do challenge the retired Generals that want to contest either as governors or senators that they should prove how many officers have they put in the service, which of course they mean from their religion. This perceptions of the contemporary politicians on religion made the serving Generals in the military that have political ambitions to be sentimental to their own personnel of the same faith, and this by extension leads to threat to Military Unity.

According to Air Vice Marshal Inuwa of the Defence Headquarters, Religious sentiments is on the increase in the military most especially among the recruitment officers. During recruitment exercises in any arm of service within the Armed Forces (Army, Navy, Air force) the guidelines are clear in terms of candidate to be recruited or commissioned with regards to essentials required for their engagement. These guidelines include age, height, physical fitness, educational qualifications, gender and quarter system. Religion is not a criteria for been recruited in the military except those applying for chaplain and Imams Departments. However, these officers in charge most times do give preference to candidates that they happened to be in the same faith with them in other to fulfil their ambitions.

AVM Inuwa also laments the same sentiments do exist during promotions of the commissioned officers and advancement of soldiers, appointments, and drafts. He affirms that the issuance of letter of commendation by the Service Chief or that of displeasure to an officer or soldier base on religious sentiments most times with the aim of favouring personnel of the same faith and the crippling or bringing to an end the others career in the military is condemnable.. These letters were initiated in the military to motivate officers that are hard-working and to punish those that perform below average in the service, religion not inclusive. Letter of commendation will lead to quick promotion for an officer while that of displeasure will delay or even lose of promotion to the affected officer.

### **Application of Federal Character in Recruitment Process**

According to Wing Commander Zannah Baba Shuwa, The application of Federal Character during the time of recruitment into the Nigerian Armed Forces has contributed immensely in Religious Conflicts within the military. This is because the form the six geopolitical zones in the country some zones are predominately Christians with Muslims as minorities, such as states of the South-South, and South-East while other zones are predominantly Muslims with Christians as minorities, such states in North – West and North East. The other zones: North-Central and the South – West both claiming equal percentage of Muslims and Christians.

The conflict that the application of the federal character brought to the military circle is that if Muslims are recruited into the military from states like Cross Rivers, Enugu and Bayelsa, it is assumed that non indigenes were recruited, so also if Christians are recruited from states like Sokoto, Kano, Kebbi, Borno, Gombe e.t.c it is also assumed that there is a foul play in that recruitment exercise. In some cases, the traditional rulers of such affected areas do write petitions to the military complaining that the candidates recruited from their states are not indigenous persons but mere settlers and therefore they can not represent their states.

### **Religious Challenges In The Military**

Religion is said to be a reality in human experience which pervades through life. It describes the way man relates with the supernatural world or the Divine Being. This relationship finds expression in beliefs, worships, creeds and symbols (Uka, 1990). Members of the Nigerian Armed Forces are entitled to the same right of religious freedom as members of the general public. However, military service does present unique circumstances and concerns that are not present outside the military context.

In civilian life, for example, it would be unacceptable for the government to use tax funds to provide chaplains and pay their salaries. Religious leaders and houses of worship

(Mosque and Churches) are supported by voluntary donations, not government support. The military are usually stationed away from their homes and may even be sent to foreign lands. These personnel are not able to worship at their home congregations and may in-fact be far away from any congregation they would recognize or feel comfortable to attending. These places of worships must be provided for them.

The military hierarchical nature also presents a unique challenge for religious liberty issues. In civilian setting there is possibilities of discrimination along religious lines, but it is difficult to replicate this structure in the military context. The hierarchical nature of the chain of command in the military stresses discipline and makes it difficult for a subordinate to feel entirely comfortable challenging a superior. Thus, any allegation of religious pressure down the chain of command requires heightened scrutiny.

Most of the religious challenges found in the Nigeria Armed Forces are Intra-religious, this is because the discipline in the military have taken care of inter-religious conflicts. In the same religion, sometimes misunderstanding do occur between the spiritual leaders and their members. This is so because apart from the catholic that both the leadership of the church and the followers are on the same page of interpretation. Protestants are people that belong to different churches before joining military but found themselves in the same church after joining the military. This make it possible the pastor for example that is posted to Nigerian Defence Academy Kaduna may be a member of Anglican while majority of the church members are ECWA.

There is misconception to as when military personnels are deployed for a mission to crises zones, they were taught not to be biased reasons for the protection of the minority. To clarify this, the cases of north central and north east are pivotal. The military does not take sides based on religious lines. There is no sentiment only that the allegation that people are making is that if the taskforce operates in north central i.e. Benue, Plateau etc. the Christians there would be thinking that the military are anti Christians and they are pro Muslims because the Muslims are the minority. There are allegations that the Fulani's, are protected, while the innocent ones that are killed and looted are further caged. But if the same task-force are deployed to Sokoto and Kano whereby the hoodlums want to destroy churches and loot Christians shops and burn buses that belongs to the Christians the military would protect them and yet you would see the muslims saying the military are anti Muslim because they are protecting churches and wealth of the Christians from looting. So with this we can now ascertain that the military do not and will never take sides during religious conflicts.

## **Conclusion**

From the work done on the military religious relationship, plenty factors were looked at from the military and civilian side of the society. In conclusion it was affirmed that yes, the military recognizes both the Christian and Muslim faith but does not either use the difference against the military men on civilians, as the only aim of the military is to unite the military men to serve justly, by code and transparency. The air was also cleared as to the few confusions by the civilians on some perceived bias from the military men, it was observed that military conduct is not in favour of religion but after settling conflicts and preventing harm to the minority who belong to either religion and tribe.

Although religious extremism is always a deterring factor to the progress of any society and the military inclusive, but the code of conduct within the military will not allow in any sense religious differences to come between the personnel and with the command of their superiors they will exercise their duties irrespective of their views. So we can now see that the military men do take Religion serious as it's an identity of its personnel but never is it in any of its system of operation allowed the difference to interfere in exerting its functions.

## **Recommendation**

This research work was aimed at the religious difference, using the military as a case study, but while doing the research plenty things were observed and also after drawing conclusions there were more things noticed as such these were points that should be done to better foster the growth of a society without religious difference being an issue.

One of the points taken into consideration is the lack of knowledge on the reasons why military men support the minority in preventing chaos, so this research recommends that there should be sensitizing of the civilians especially those in the crisis prone areas to make them understand the reasons for some activities of the military men in time of crisis. Another is the fact that presence of extremism is a factor that deters the military men in some cases in discharging their duties, It is recommended therefore that further research be done to identify how to curb that menace totally. Lastly the unity of the military men has been stand out among the military men not allowing the religious difference come between them so it is recommended that more should be done to foster that growth.

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**List of Interviewees**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>ADDRESS</b>	<b>PROFESSION</b>	<b>DATE</b>
1.	Commander Ibrahim Chonoko	52	Naval Headquarters Abuja	Naval Officer	23 Aug 23
2.	Commander Abdul Azeez Nyako	48	Jimeta-Yola	RTD Naval Officer	20 Oct 23
3.	Wing Commander Zannel Baba Shuwa	40	Air Force Base Kadauna	Air Force Officer	15 Sep 23
4.	Air-Vice Mashall Muhammed Inwa	57	Defence Headquarters Abuja	Air Force Officer	23 Aug 23